



STEERING COMMITTEE

Ellie Angerame
New CT Farmer Alliance

Joseph Bonelli
University of Connecticut

Bonnie Burr
University of Connecticut

Dina Brewster
CT NOFA

Clark Chapin
Town of East Windsor

Paul Elconin
Northwest Connecticut Land
Conservancy

Amanda Freund
Freund's Farm
CowPots

Gordon Gibson
Connecticut State Grange

Eric Hammerling
CT Forest & Park Association

Terry Jones
Jones Family Farms

Kip Kolesinskas
Manchester

Nathan L'Etoile
American Farmland Trust

Elisabeth Moore
Connecticut Farmland Trust

Joan Nichols
CT Farm Bureau Association

Will O'Meara
Land for Good

Amy Paterson
CT Land Conservation Council

Richard Roberts
Halloran & Sage

Jim Smith
Cushman Farm

Latha Swamy
City of New Haven Food System
Policy Division

Keith Stechschulte
Farm Credit East

STAFF

Chelsea Gazillo - Director
cgazillo@farmland.org

Armando Paolino - Lobbyist

Working Lands Alliance Policy Statement HB 6577 GAE Committee Public Hearing March 10, 2021

Dear Co-Chairs, Flexer and Fox, Vice-Chairs Haskell and Thomas, Ranking Members Sampson and Mastrofrancesco, and members of the GAE Committee:

The Working Lands Alliance appreciates this opportunity to submit testimony in **opposition** of HB 6577 Section 1 and 4, An Act Concerning the State Properties Review Board. Both of these sections will slow down the Community Farms Preservation Program process furthering hindering our efforts to prevent small farms from development and making it harder for new and beginning farmers to access affordable farmland.

My name is Chelsea Gazillo, and I am American Farmland Trust's New England Policy Manager. In Connecticut, I direct the Working Lands Alliance, a broad-based, statewide coalition dedicated to preserving Connecticut's farmland. WLA includes farmers and such organizations as CT Farmland Trust, the CT State Grange, New CT Farmer Alliance, City of New Haven Food Policy Division, CT Land Conservation Council, and the CT Farm Bureau Association, among many others. As an Alliance, we care deeply both about saving the state's working farmland and ensuring a healthy agricultural sector and prosperous future for Connecticut residents.

Since 1979, the Connecticut Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program has done an exemplary job in protecting our state's vast farmlands from development. In fact, according to a 2020 report released by American Farmland Trust "***Farms Under Threat- A New England Perspective***", ranks the CT Farmland Preservation Program as one of the **top 10** Programs in the US for Quality & Effectiveness. In 2008, the Connecticut General Assembly created the Community Farms Preservation Program to protect the last farm in town or Connecticut's SMALL farms that do not qualify for the PDR program from development.

Since Connecticut established a farmland preservation program, farmland protection across the country has evolved. The 1996 Farm Bill created a pilot Farmland Protection Program which allowed for federal funds to be used to purchase agricultural conservation easements. This pilot program eventually became the Agricultural Conservation Easement Program – Agriculture Land Easements in the 2014 Farm Bill. Today, the program which is overseen by USDA – Natural Conservation Resource Services (NRCS) uses federal funds to match state dollars in protecting our agricultural lands for perpetuity. The program is allocated between \$3.5-6 million dollars for Connecticut to use on agricultural development rights acquisitions. In addition, local and statewide land trusts like Northwest Connecticut Land Conservancy and Connecticut Farmland Trust also contribute

significant funds to the process. Often a farmer will sell the development rights at to the state below full market value or for a bargain deal.

STEERING COMMITTEE

Ellie Angerame
New CT Farmer Alliance

Joseph Bonelli
University of Connecticut

Bonnie Burr
University of Connecticut

Dina Brewster
CT NOFA

Clark Chapin
Town of East Windsor

Paul Elconin
Northwest Connecticut Land
Conservancy

Amanda Freund
Freund's Farm
CowPots

Gordon Gibson
Connecticut State Grange

Eric Hammerling
CT Forest & Park Association

Terry Jones
Jones Family Farms

Kip Kolesinskas
Manchester

Nathan L'Etoile
American Farmland Trust

Elisabeth Moore
Connecticut Farmland Trust

Joan Nichols
CT Farm Bureau Association

Will O'Meara
Land for Good

Amy Paterson
CT Land Conservation Council

Richard Roberts
Halloran & Sage

Jim Smith
Cushman Farm

Latha Swamy
City of New Haven Food System
Policy Division

Keith Stechschulte
Farm Credit East

STAFF

Chelsea Gazillo - Director
cgazillo@farmland.org

Armando Paolino - Lobbyist

Today, a Community Farms Preservation Program application goes through many vigorous steps from the time a farmer submits their application to closing. Most farmland preservation projects utilized USDA-NRCS funding and are subject to multiple agricultural appraisals that are completed by certified appraisers who must attend a special training on how to evaluate the agricultural value of a farm.

And because these projects utilize local funding, a project may be subject to a public hearing or a town vote before local dollars are expended to protect the farm. Community Farms Preservation Program projects are well vetted by state, federal, and local officials (which includes appraisers, surveyors, attorneys, and qualified agency employees) who understand the comprehensive and complex process of evaluating the development rights on agricultural lands. A project must also follow State and Federal Agency and land trust standards and practices and be in compliance with the Internal Revenue Service's regulations. In addition, the Attorney General's office has final approval over all Farmland Preservation Program projects. By adding the State Properties Review Board to the Community Farms Preservation Program, we will be adding an extra step that will slow down the process and make it harder for farmers to access land tenure.

Over the next 20 years, 371 million acres of farmland (41% of all farmland) in the United States is expected to change hands. At the same time, the average age of principle farm operators in Connecticut is 58 years old and many of these farmers are looking to transition their farm operations to new ownership. Additionally, according to 2014 report written by American Farmland Trust – Gaining Insight, Gaining Access - over 92% of Connecticut's 1,892 senior farmers do not have a young (under 45) farm operator working with them. While this does not mean that these farmers do not have a succession plan, it suggests that the future of many of these farms is uncertain. Conversely, at the same time, according to a 2018 report written by the National Young Farmers Coalition, Building a Future with Farmers, the biggest issue facing young and beginning farmers in our country is access to land tenure.

The Community Farms Preservation Program is one of the few mechanisms the state currently has that creates affordable land access opportunities for new and beginning farmers. Connecticut has some of the most expensive farmland in the country. According to a 2019 National Agricultural Statistic Service Agriculture Census survey, the average price of farmland per acre is \$12,200 which means we have the third most expensive farmland in the country (third to RI and NJ). Since the program's inception, we have protected 11 farms using the Community Farms Preservation Program. With the help of the CT Department of Agriculture and the CT Farmland Preservation Advisory Board, Working Lands Alliance is hopeful we can do more of these projects and create additional land access opportunities for beginning farmers.



STEERING COMMITTEE

Ellie Angerame
New CT Farmer Alliance

Joseph Bonelli
University of Connecticut

Bonnie Burr
University of Connecticut

Dina Brewster
CT NOFA

Clark Chapin
Town of East Windsor

Paul Elconin
Northwest Connecticut Land
Conservancy

Amanda Freund
Freund's Farm
CowPots

Gordon Gibson
Connecticut State Grange

Eric Hammerling
CT Forest & Park Association

Terry Jones
Jones Family Farms

Kip Kolesinskas
Manchester

Nathan L'Etoile
American Farmland Trust

Elisabeth Moore
Connecticut Farmland Trust

Joan Nichols
CT Farm Bureau Association

Will O'Meara
Land for Good

Amy Paterson
CT Land Conservation Council

Richard Roberts
Halloran & Sage

Jim Smith
Cushman Farm

Latha Swamy
City of New Haven Food System
Policy Division

Keith Stechschulte
Farm Credit East

STAFF

Chelsea Gazillo - Director
cgazillo@farmland.org

Armando Paolino - Lobbyist

If Connecticut wants to promote agriculture for future generations, we need to use very tool in the toolbox to make our working lands available. If the state adds the State Properties Review Board to the Community Farms Preservation process it will add an unnecessary step to the process and make it harder to protect small farms and promote land access opportunities for beginning farmers

On behalf of the Working Lands Alliance, I urge this committee to oppose HB 6477 Section 1 and 4. Thank You.

Sincerely,
Chelsea Gazillo
Working Lands Alliance